

SYLVA BRITANNICA

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLATES

PLATE I.—THE SWILCAR-LAWN OAK

THE OAK, admirable alike for its beauty and utility, has ever been distinguished over all the trees of which it may be considered to reign with undisputed swiftness and longevity.

The Oak was held sacred by the Greeks, the Romans, the Gauls, and the Britons; it was dedicated to Jupiter; among the ancient Britons, its consecrated shade was the scene of the ceremonies of the Druids; and scarcely is it held in less veneration by their descendants, the interest of which it may be despoiled by the passing away of the superstitions connected with it. It revived in those present to them, by the ideas of British power, and British glory, associated with the image of the British Oak, in the minds of Englishmen; who, from its branching arms,

Those sapling oaks which at Britannia's call  
May heave their trunks mature into the main,  
And float the bulwarks of her liberty.—MASOX.

In proportion as the Oak is valued above all other trees, so is the English Oak in other countries, for its particular characteristics of hardness and toughness; qualities, which are thus admirably expressed in two epithets by that great poet, Nature, and of the human heart, seemed alike laid open.

Thou rather with thy sharp and sulph'rous bolt,  
Splitt'st the *unwedgable* and *gnarled* Oak,  
Than the soft myrtle.—SHAKESPEARE.

The Oak is to be found in all soils; its growth, however, greatly depends on the nature of the soil; for though the hardness of its infancy is such as to render choice of soil unnecessary, yet as it advances towards maturity, the depth and extent to which it strikes its roots, and its magnitude and vigor depend on the congenial and uninterrupted field it may find for its growth.

Under favorable circumstances, the Oak attains an age far beyond that which is popular belief, viz. an hundred years for its growth, an hundred for its maturity, and an hundred for its decay. The Swilcar Oak, represented in the accompanying engraving, is known, by historical records, to be six hundred years old; and it is still far from being in the last stage of decay.

This venerable tree stands in Needwood Forest, in Staffordshire. Its girth, at the base, is twenty-one feet four inches and a half. Fifty-four years ago it was measured by a laboring man still living, and measured at that time nineteen feet. It has been celebrated by several modern bards; among whom may be particularized Mr. Mundy, whose magnificent poem, "Needwood Forest," drew forth so elegant a compliment to himself, and so animated a subject of his verse, from the pen of Doctor Darwin, that it is hoped but little necessary for introducing the lines containing them, as the most appropriate conclusion to the article.

"Gigantic Oak! whose wrinkled form hath stood,  
Age after age, the patriarch of the wood!—  
Thou, who hast seen a thousand springs unfold  
Their ravel'd buds, and dip their flowers in gold;  
Ten thousand times yon moon re-light her horn,  
And that bright star of evening gild the morrow!—

"First, when the Druid-bards with silver hair  
Pour'd round thy trunk the melody of prayer;  
When chiefs and heroes join'd the kneeling throng,  
And choral virgins trill'd the adorning song;  
While harps responsive rung amid the glade,  
And holy echoes thrill'd thy vaulted shade;  
Say, did such dulcet notes arrest thy gales,  
As Mundy pours along the hasting vales?

"Gigantic Oak! thy hoary hair  
Fretful must perish in the  
Should round thy brow in vain  
And no fierce whirlwinds shatter  
Yet shalt Thou fall!—thy  
And those bare shatter'd  
Arm after arm shall leave the  
And thy firm fibres crumble

"But Mundy's verse shall crown  
And rising forests envy Swinburne  
Green shall thy germs expand  
And bloom for ever in thy